The holidays are upon us and we are in the eating mode. Food has become an important part of our holiday celebrations. But did you realize that 25 percent of the food that comes into people’s houses is wasted? Whether it is a matter of overbuying, holding it too long, or even bad storage practices, we all need to do a better job of using the food we are spending our dollars on.

Christmas is just a couple of weeks away. It is a perfect time to clean your refrigerator so you don’t lose food in the rotation and have adequate storage space for what you are purchasing.

The refrigerator is one appliance that never gets a rest. It is always running, so a little time cleaning and organizing will make it work better and will make it last longer, as well as keep your food fresher.

Start by taking everything out of the refrigerator. Discard UMOs (Unidentified Moldy Objects). If you have opened jars of things that you won’t use again or at least soon, discard them.

If leftovers are not to be used immediately, freeze them. I keep a plastic bag in my freezer for all those small amounts of vegetables or chunks of meat that never seem to be eaten up. Next time I have occasion to make soup, I have a head start.

Wash the inside walls of the refrigerator using mild dishwashing liquid and water. Take out the shelves and the drawers to clean in the sink. Be sure to clean along the door seal, if necessary, using an old toothbrush to get down in the grooves of the seal.

Before you put the jars and containers away, give them a quick wash. Spills on the outside of containers can hold a multitude of microbiological activity.
When everything is back in, take a few minutes to care for the outside of the appliance. Vacuum the coils at the back or the bottom of the fridge. These coils are responsible for the cooling of the appliance. If they aren’t clean, your refrigerator doesn’t work correctly. Clean the floor under the fridge, the top of the fridge and the front doors. If you have a stainless steel fridge like I have, fingerprints that mar the front are a real challenge. You can use a commercial stainless steel spray or vinegar on a cloth. Be sure to rub in the direction of the grain for a beautiful finish.

Now that everything is back in the fridge and it is clean, take stock of how to keep it that way. Wipe up spills as they happen. Use your nose to sniff out those lingering odors that indicate mold. Store your leftovers in airtight containers. Not only will they stay fresher and ready to use, but also odors won’t seep out into the fridge.

One more thing you should do before you pat yourself on the back for a job well done is to add a refrigerator thermometer to the inside. I had the experience recently of a refrigerator that had stopped cooling. It took me a day or so to remember to check the thermometer and realize that I had a problem. Keep a thermometer in the refrigerator and check it regularly. The temperature in the refrigerator should be between 32 and 40 degrees. My new refrigerator has the temperature in a digital form on the door. How handy is that?

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